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## ***Literacy, Basic Education, or Reading Competence? An Introduction***

This compilation is supposed to summarize the current state of the debate on different theories, empirical results, and practical activities and to combine them specifically. Some of the contributions were jointly discussed to conclude a three-year literacy project at a congress in Rennes (France). Other essays are thought to cover more recent topical fields as being discussed in other disciplines.

As an introduction, education-political and future trends are discussed. Then surveys on literacy are introduced, followed by qualitative studies. After this we will discuss some subject-related topical fields (computers, brain research, linguistics, social constructivism). Selected project activities will complete the picture and guarantee the extension of the discourse.

The congress in Rennes showed that among theorists there is considerable interest in practical & empirical experience, while throughout the three years practitioners were again and again demanding and receiving theoretical contributions. Another congress, the Hochschultage (University Days) 2006, made another meeting of actors from the fields of literacy and reading competence possible (vocational education, innovation, and social integration 2006). Here, the emphasis was on the field of competence measurement and diagnostics. Against the background of the oncoming international PIAAC study (also: PISA for adults or PISA LIFELONG), considerable dynamics of this subject must be expected. But will it be a successful attempt to move adults, who are not subject to a teacher's orders in a classroom, to take part in literacy tests?

Regarding the state of research and its development, *Erhard Schlutz* commences the first part of the volume and makes clear how much the studies on school performance focus our view at schools and this way overlook the question of what the future of these many fifteen-years-olds will be like, who six years ago did not have enough basic competences to achieve more than the lowest out of five levels of reading competence (which in our country makes them being graded as functional illiterates, see Nickel in this volume). Schlutz criticises the ideology of self-organized reduction of differences in the age of informal learning and identifies fields of research as well as strategic tasks for practical work.

From the current process, *Dieter Gnahn* reports on the state of affairs of the intended "Programme Adult Competencies" (PIAAC). Both the examples of tasks and the outlines of spot checks and panels show how difficult it is to agree on a canon of definite, testable competences, which may claim to be internationally valid. For each investigation, the decision to take part in IALS, ALL, or PIAAC is left to national structures. For the time being, one cannot see which strategies will be used by the different government.

Following this, *Sven Nickel* proceeds to literacy work with adults, his focus being particularly on literacy as a “life-accompanying process”. Here, the continuous development of literacy in daily practice becomes clear, which is also emphasized by *Andrea Linde*’s essay. Nickel, however, changes the point of view towards the further development of parents, aiming at improving their children’s literacy. This double perspective is currently making a career under the title of “Family Literacy”. Besides embedding into the family situation, Nickel makes a connection to social-structural facts and thus protects the concept of “literacy” from the suspicion of falsely discussing social segmentation as individualized risks.

Now, there also occurs the question of who must be considered illiterate and which fields of reading and writing are affected. A question which is again and again difficult to answer for teachers in literacy work is how to judge on specific reading and writing problems. Here, detailed knowledge of language, grammar, and writing is necessary. His focus being on the diagnosis of young people, *Rudolf Kretschmann* introduces a qualitative tool which is based on tests and observations. His method aims at specific support, for which there are valuable ideas.

After this introduction, in the second part there is reporting on current or finished empirical surveys. For this, *Andrea Linde* and *Anke Grotlüschen* present a short look at research results, particularly regarding countries taking part in the projects. Based on an experts’ round, impressions of the country-specific perceptions of PISA results are increased to express a “subjective PISA result” and confronted with national policies. There is the impression that international comparative studies serve less for politically controlling than for legitimizing supra-national trends.

France went an alternative way by installing her own national survey structure after having left the IALS survey. Her *Agence National de Lutte contre l’illettrisme*, which took up the fight against illiteracy, plays a special role. *Jean-Pierre Jeanthau* reports on this and shows the method and the results of the IVQ surveys. Specific for the IVQ survey is the successful access to uneducated groups which often are underrepresented in extended surveys, as they refuse to answer written questions.

Orientated at quality and biography, *Birte Egloff* completes the empirical grasp at literacy by compressing curves to patterns and discussing their contexts. From essential elements of childhood and time at school via typical games of hide and seek as far as to situations in life which trigger off a breakout from living as an illiterate, Egloff shows the ups and downs of such biographies. She modifies the model of the individual-theoretical genesis of illiteracy (*Döbert/Nickel 2000*) by emphasizing withheld childhood, school performance curve, and finding a profession.

Referring to social groups, *Szilvia Kis* turns to the problem of nomad Hungarians. In this context considerable differentiations occur, which it is not always easy to do justice to. For this volume we chose the term “Gypsy” which is preferred by the German Sinti Alliance. Kis makes clear which historical efforts there have been to make Gypsies attend schools and acquire written language, and that these attempts failed systematically, due to the children’s resistance. Neither law nor prosecution

are suitable for forcing a non-literal culture to become a literal one. In contrast to this, successful examples reach back to accepting multi-lingualism and heterogeneity.

Here it becomes obvious again that literacy is an inter-disciplinary topic. Thus, the third part of the volume collects different theoretical discourses and approaches. Here, *Andrea Linde* works out the complexity of the terminology – particularly for international co-operation. Primary and secondary vs. total and functional illiteracy, basic knowledge, basic skills, and Literalität, literacy, or Illetrisme are a confusing area which is always mined by implicit stigmatizing and for which Linde presents a differentiated analysis. By the example of the “New Literacy Studies (NLS)” from the Anglo-Saxon countries she speaks out for understanding literacy to be a social practice.

Viewing at two current discourses, *Finn Egil Tonnessen* interferes with the debate. He shows the errors of understanding “Brains & Computers” to be the same, which since the end of the 1960s have again and again been part of the debate. Tonnessen discusses the relationship between behaviourism and connectivism as well as the information-technological changes of society as a background of (lacking) literacy.

The discourse was renewed by neurobiological research, which discusses dyslexia – anyway a debated concept – as cerebrally caused. This discourse as well as the linguistic and cognitivist tradition is reported by *Bjorg Solstad Rustad*, necessarily going through fields of research and results regarding reading and writing in a rather superficial way. She confronts us with a variety of single results which themselves must be evaluated for further research and practical work.

*Catherine le Cunff*, referring language to learning obstacles and presenting a systematization for this, takes a linguistic and socialization-theoretical point of view. Her essay reaches back to a social-constructivist theoretical concept and embeds knowledge of writing into a set of research results on oral language. Language-didactic hints complete her contribution.

The fourth part of the volume takes up two important contributions from the field of practical work. In this context, *Almut Schladebach* devotes herself to a “red rag to a bull” which is something like the central theme of this volume, i. e. filling in forms. Every research on literacy will finally reach those concerned themselves and will ask for qualitative interviews or for doing tests or answering questionnaires. Also future surveys will have to face this problem. A total of 147 attendants of literacy classes of the Grundbildungszentrum der Hamburger Volkshochschulen (Centre for Basic Education of the Hamburg Adult Education Centre) made the effort to judge on their classes by help of questionnaires.

Regarding the question in how far e-learning systems are also suitable for uneducated groups, *Ralf Kellershohn* offers insights into the learning homepage [ich-will-schreiben-lernen.de](http://ich-will-schreiben-lernen.de), which has won several awards and is widely spread among the German community. He postulates e-inclusion to be a task which thus will also bring digital literacy into the focus of basic education. This way, the question about binding basic knowledge - a canon - is asked again. Kellershohn

points out to the digital split and discusses possibilities of the project and its extension towards the homepage “Zweite Chance (Second Chance) Online”.

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